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AUTHOR Drew, Benjamin; Waters, Judith
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ABSTRACT

Although inflation has forced many older persons to find part-time employment or to continue working past their anticipated retirement age, stereotypes of aging may hinder the acceptance of older persons in the workplace. It is particularly important to assess attitudes toward the elderly in a working class population who will first feel the impact of increased numbers of older workers in the labor force. Since very young workers and retired persons seeking employment are both competing for the same low-status jobs, it is also important to assess the attitudes of young people toward the elderly in the labor force. In an attempt to examine these attitudes, low-income, working class Puerto Rican adults (N=43) and high school seniors (N=55) living in New Jersey were asked to complete a questionnaire which covered perceptions of job competence, physical ability and illness, cognitive functioning, power, and social and sexual activity. Subjects estimated the percentage of older men and of older women they felt exhibited the trait or behavior in question. The results indicated that there were significant differences in perceptions between male and female subjects and between high school students and adults. In general, students, more than working adults, considered older workers to have poor coordination, accidents, and problems learning new methods. Students also thought older workers were overpaid, frequently absent because of illness, and too costly for employers. (NRB)

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Perceptions of Job Competence in Older Workers

Benjamin Drew and Judith Waters
Fairleigh Dickinson University

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(1) Perceptions of job competence in older workers.

(2) Social, Attitudes, Person Perception

(3) Problem

In these times of economic crisis, we find an increasing number of groups (e.g., adolescents, women, minority groups and the aging) competing for a constantly decreasing number of jobs. The technology that contributed to advances in medical care extending lifespan and improving the quality of life has also led to the development of sophisticated robotics, replacing in the process both skilled and unskilled workers. The continued emphasis on a technology that promises to keep reducing the number of jobs performed by humans has become a major concern particularly for labor unions and workers involved in light and heavy industry.

Over the past 35 years, retirement has been institutionalized as a socially expected phase of life (Blau, 1973). However, a steadily rising rate of inflation has eaten away at the value of pensions funds and Social Security payments making it necessary for large numbers of older people to find part-time employment or to remain on the job past the time they had anticipated retiring. Many able-bodied people must keep working whenever possible because private pension funds are not available to the vast majority of unskilled workers and they simply can't afford to retire.

Of almost equal importance is the concept that occupation is a vital element in one's identity and strongly influences self-esteem (Holmes & Rahe, 1967). Moreover, social stratification most often occurs along occupational lines so that without a job defined role, there is a decrease in social status for most unemployed workers or retirees (Streib, 1976; Puner, 1976). Job loss can lead to an increasingly poor self-image and

feelings of uselessness, loneliness, aimlessness, demoralization and isolation (Streib and Schneider, 1971; Blau, 1973; Freese, 1977).

Employers, however, may not be willing to retain older employees with seniority who represent higher costs than younger workers in the form of salary increments and fringe benefits accumulated over the years. On the other hand, retired workers are also perceived to be a financial burden, this time to taxpayers in terms of medical insurance costs and federal, state and municipal programs for the ailing and/or poverty level aged. Thus, it is clear that even the most creative solutions to problems raised by the "graying of America" will lead to difficulties for other segments of the population, chiefly the working class (Kerr & Rosow, 1979).

One of the most serious barriers to the acceptance of older people in the workplace, outside of the economic issues, is the existence of strong, deeply embedded stereotypes of aging. The success of policy changes involving retirement age or the establishment of programs for hiring older workers depends, in part, on understanding the beliefs of various segments of society concerning the capabilities of older men and women.

It is particularly important to assess attitudes toward the elderly in a working class population because this segment of society will be the first to feel the impact of increased numbers of elderly either remaining in or returning to the work force. The most immediate effects will be felt in the secondary labor market.

The secondary labor market consists of low-status positions requiring minimal skills and experience with little or no opportunity for advancement and relatively low salaries (e.g., dishwasher, messenger, gas station attendant, night watchman, fast food service worker, janitor)

(Kaufman & Spilerman, 1982). These jobs became the focus of secondary careers for elderly workers forced into retirement. Very young adults looking for temporary employment are also attracted to this market and the two groups often find themselves in competition for these dead end jobs out of a desperate need to survive.

The authors have conducted a survey of the attitudes of low income Puerto Rican adults and high school seniors, a group likely to be affected by an increase in the number of older people in the job market.

(4) Subjects

The sample was composed of 98 working class Puerto Rican subjects (24 adult males and 19 adult females, ranging in age from the mid twenties to early sixties; 18 high school senior males and 37 high school senior females). All of the adults were currently employed. The entire sample came from a suburban area in Northwest New Jersey.

(5) Procedure

A questionnaire was administered to each respondent individually in the language of his choice (Spanish or English).

The instrument covered perceptions of job competence, physical ability and illness, cognitive functioning, power and those stereotypic items that may be considered a source of irritation between the generations. Each set of 37 questions was asked separately about "older men" and "older women" in order to test the concept that a differential pattern of attitudes toward aging exists that depends on the sex of the older person.

Instead of requiring subjects to merely "agree" or "disagree" with a series of statements, they were requested to estimate the percentage of

"older men" or "older women" who exhibited the particular trait or behavior (0 to 100%).

An anlysis of variance was performed on the responses to each statement. The independent variables were age and sex of subject and sex of stimulus persons ("older men" versus "older women"). The dependent measure was the percentage reported for each statement.

Subjects were also asked at what age they thought "middle age" and "old age" began.

(6)

The data indicate that (1) as people grow older they tend to think that "middle age" and "old age begins later, (2) the sample sees more than half of the older population as suffering from some disabilities or decrements in physical or cognitive functioning, but feels that more older people worry about their health than are actually sick (up to 75%), (3) the subjects also rated older men and women as wanting to give advice and complaining about the younger generation. There was a general consensus that older people need more love and reassurance than anyone else (up to 87%).

The focus of the study was on job competence. The high school students felt that more older workers had "poor coordination," "accidents," "problems in learning new methods" than did the adults. The students also said that more older workers (men and women) were "paid too much," "lost too much time because of illness" and were "too costly for their employers" than did the working adults (See Table 1).

Insert Table 1 about here.

At the same time, the high school students said older people have "power in business and politics." All subjects saw older men as more powerful than older women.

There were significant differences in perceptions between male and female subjects as well as between the high school students and working adults. The hypothesis of a differential pattern of attitudes toward aging based on sex was supported.

(7) Implications and conclusions

The results indicate that, despite some significant differences, all subjects estimated that at least half of the aging population was forgetful, not as mentally alert as younger workers and disabled in some way. Only half of all older people were perceived to be capable of doing a full day's work. The variations in attitude between male and female subjects and the differences in perception of "older men" versus "older women," while clear evidence for the "double standard of aging," were not as pervasive as the gap between the high school students and the working men and women. The high school students held views that were distinctly more negative toward older people than the rest of the sample. One viable explanation for the discrepancy lies in the competition between the young and the old for jobs in the secondary market. It will be interesting to compare the responses of these subjects with those of middle and upper class students who may not feel the threat of competition from older people.

Table 1. Summary of responses of subjects (high school students and working adults) to "older men" and "older women"

Questions	Ss	Sex of Older Person: Older Men — Adult Males	Older Men — Adult Females	Older Men — H.S. Males	Older Men — H.S. Females	Older Women — Adult Males	Older Women — Adult Females	Older Women — H.S. Males	Older Women — H.S. Females
What percentage of older men/women:									
1. can put in a full day's work?		58*	60	63	65	58	63	60	59
2. are paid too much for the work they do?		50	36	57	60	44	36	57	61
3. lose too much time from work (illness)?		59	44	60	61	60	49	59	59
4. have slow reaction times?		61	58	59	62	53	50	60	59
5. are interested in job security over pay raises?		68	56	57	62	59	71	59	65
6. have problems learning new things?		58	45	65	60	58	57	59	58
7. are more costly .. than younger workers?		50	51	52	58	51	33	56	62
8. have some physical disability?		53	49	65	54	58	48	59	60
9. worry more about their health than younger workers?		65	70	66	64	65	70	62	62
10. avoid physical activity?		49	59	59	56	56	56	57	56
11. have poor physical coordination?		56	48	62	66	56	56	65	65
12. get into more accidents than younger workers?		49	37	53	38	54	47	54	38
13. are forgetful?		51	45	60	62	54	53	56	59
14. are mentally alert		54	60	57	59	58	56	50	56

Table 1. Summary of responses of subjects (high school students and working adults) to "older men" and "older women" (Cont'd)

Questions	Ss	Sex of Older Person: Older Men: Adult Males	Older Men: Adult Females	Older Men: H.S. Males	Older Men: H.S. Females	Older Women: Adult Males	Older Women: Adult Females	Older Women: H.S. Males	Older Women: H.S. Females
What percentage of older men/women:									
15. can manage their own affairs?		60	59	66	64	62	63	59	60
16. are afraid of death and dying?		59	68	65	64	60	71	54	62
17. like to give advice to others?		66	78	57	60	65	78	59	63
18. are conservative?		63	64	65	62	63	71	57	58
19. complain about the younger generation?		58	70	57	61	65	72	62	62
20. are "different" and hard to understand?		49	46	62	62	52	46	65	60
21. bore people with talk of the "old days?"		49	47	56	61	56	60	60	63
22. grow wiser as they grow older?		38	45	54	56	52	50	56	59
23. expect others to take care of them		51	46	66	65	54	44	62	63
24. should live only with others their own age?		56	37	59	62	60	34	57	60
25. need more love and reassurance than anyone else?		63	79	63	62	68	72	63	59
26. have a lot of power in business and politics?		60	56	59	61	55	42	57	58
27. would like to work for younger supervisors?		58	44	65	63	50	47	54	57

* Responses in percentages.

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